

## Testimony on Thrive Montgomery 2050 – Council Listening Session

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*From Rachel Toker, on behalf of Urban Ecosystem Restorations, Inc. (a 501(c)(3) nonprofit working in Montgomery County, Maryland)*

### The Need for Nature: What Makes a Strong, Economically Competitive, and Desirable County?

- Jobs, affordable housing, public transit, and walkable neighborhoods are all extremely important, but the presence of nature is equally important for competitive and desirable communities. Widespread and distributed natural green infrastructure -- along the entire urban to rural development spectrum -- makes communities healthy and complete. Nearby nature is a “need to have” in today’s world: for climate resilience, flood management, clean water, healthy air and temperatures, and public health. Healthy natural systems are essential for a healthy future.
- We need large and unfragmented native landscapes outside of compact, transit-oriented urban cores AND connected natural areas in a range of shapes and sizes woven inside and through these urban cores. This is true not only for the sake of regional ecosystems, but for our own health and safety as we face climate change and extreme weather.
- To incorporate nature and promote transit-oriented development, compact, dense, mixed-use development should not simply occur wherever development already exists today (doing so would reinforce existing sprawl and aggravate problems Thrive 2050 is trying to solve). Rather, compact density should be placed around established public transit hubs (while we simultaneously reduce density and expand natural areas around and between those compact communities).

### Quality and Quantity of Green Space

- Not all green spaces are created equal. It’s the native, biologically diverse landscapes that do the heavy lifting for **stormwater management, climate resilience, biodiversity support, and human health**. We need more land area for high-quality (and multi-functional) nature-based solutions and native landscapes across this County – and to do that, we need the County Council to take action to revise the Thrive 2050 plan.

### Urban Planning

- Research<sup>i</sup> confirms that urban densification processes, including consolidation and infill development, pose a threat to urban green space. Studies are showing that densifying cities lose green space and native landscapes when they do not specifically plan to conserve and increase them. In fact, **even an increase in public green spaces rarely offsets the loss of private urban green space once densification proceeds without the necessary planning**.
- Thrive 2050 will guide the County’s future land use policies, so it should set the stage for a balance between other County priorities and the expansion of urban and rural natural areas. If we do not plan for them, they will disappear – as we have seen unequivocally over the last 40+ years. And, if

we do it right, we can expand green infrastructure while providing for affordable housing and jobs. **But it requires intentional planning for all of these elements at the same time.**

- In addition, terms like “open space,” “green space,” and “green features” in urban planning documents do NOT ensure the kinds of high-quality green infrastructure and native landscapes we need (unless specifically defined as such). And simply describing a planning document, such as Thrive 2050, as one that promotes healthy environments and “climate resilience” does not make it so; rather, the document must actually require future actions that are known to accomplish these ends.

#### The Effort to Expand Quality Green Space Cannot Be Limited to Public Parks

- Public parks alone are insufficient to manage stormwater, promote climate resilience, and support biodiversity – both in terms of aggregate area dedicated to ecological function and in terms of equitable distribution. We know parks are distributed inequitably across urban neighborhoods; however, even where they are present, only small portions of their land are actually dedicated to ecological function. In addition, most public parks are not within walking distance for residents across the income spectrum. Improving existing parks is important, but that alone is NOT sufficient to address environmental and health problems – not to mention that increased population pressures on existing parks (from densification) often translates into degradation of the existing ecological functions in those parks.

#### Health Effect of Nature

- Given the importance of contact with nature for well-being, the American Public Health Association (APHA) supports “the protection and restoration of nature in the environments where people live, work, and play, at every scale from building sites to large regional park systems and ecologically sustainable rural areas.”<sup>ii</sup>
- APHA further states: “Although physical activity promotes health whether people engage in it indoors or outdoors, a number of studies connect “green exercise” outdoors in nature with greater feelings of enjoyment, energy, vitality, restoration, and self-esteem. The presence of nature has this effect independent of levels of physical activity and social interaction.”

#### Beneficial Urban Policies Under a More Balanced Thrive 2050 Plan

- A number of innovative urban policy tools are being implemented in cities and counties across the world to reincorporate nature into the built environment – even in neighboring jurisdictions like Washington, D.C. A few urban policies that could facilitate increasing nature in urban areas are:
  - substantially expanding the existing County DEP Rainscapes program,
  - implementing a green-area-ratio requirement for all new buildings and major renovations,
  - offering financial incentives for urban reforestation (such as: including urban areas as FCL offset/mitigation areas and reducing taxes for conservation easements in urban areas),
  - requiring that offsets/mitigation for environmental damage be implemented within a small and fixed radius around where the environmental damage was caused, and

- zoning for conservation areas and green overlay zones that reduce building footprints and building density in urban and suburban areas outside of compact communities (with transitional periods that phase in as properties are redeveloped over time).

In Summary:

1. Competitive counties ensure adequate green space across the urban fabric;
2. Not all “green” space is created equal – we need green space that will manage stormwater, increase climate resilience, and support biodiversity;
3. We must plan to conserve and increase quality urban green space or we will lose it;
4. Public parks play an important role in providing space for urban nature, but they are not sufficient – in terms of quantity of land area or quality of green space – to meet key urban and public health needs;
5. Exposure to nature and “green exercise” has health effects that are not equaled by physical activity in athletic facilities, city bike lanes, and other hardscapes;
6. No community is complete without nature.

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<sup>i</sup> Haaland, C., & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, C. (2015). Challenges and strategies for urban green-space planning in cities undergoing densification: A review. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2015.07.009>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/08/09/18/improving-health-and-wellness-through-access-to-nature>